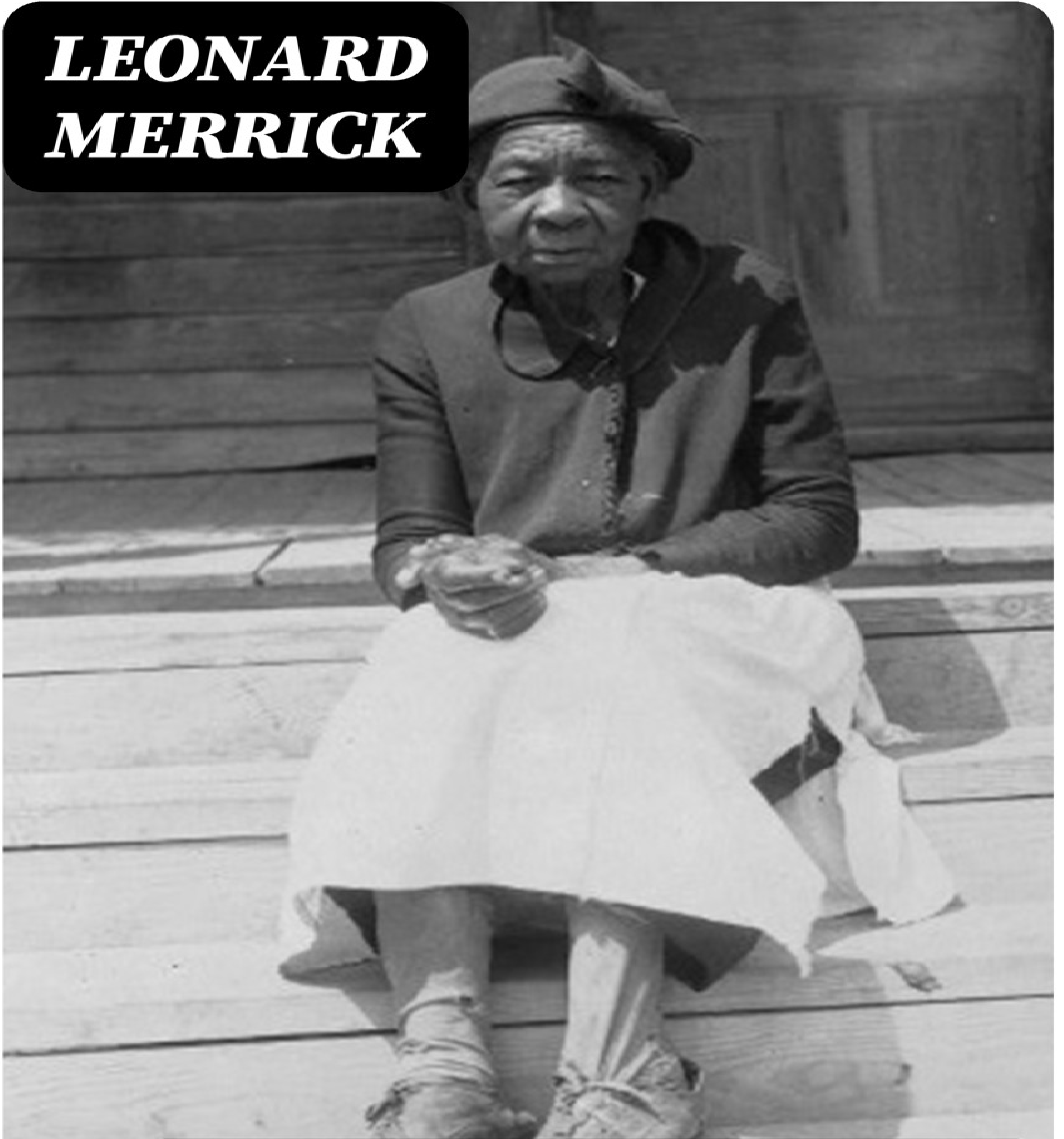
LEONARD MERRICK



THE QUAINT COMPANIONS

Leonard Merrick

The Quaint Companions

With an Introduction by H. G. Wells

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X
CHAPTER XI
CHAPTER XII
CHAPTER XIII
CHAPTER XIV
CHAPTER XV
CHAPTER XVI
CHAPTER XVII
CHAPTER XVIII
CHAPTER XIX
CHAPTER XX
CHAPTER XXI
CHAPTER XXII
CHAPTER XXIII
CHAPTER XXIV

INTRODUCTION

The chief fault of *The Quaint Companions* is that it ends. Mr. Merrick is no follower of the "well-made novel" school; he accepts his liberties as an English novelist, and this book has not only the beginning and middle and end of one story, but the beginning and some of the middle of another. The intelligent reader would be the gladder if it went on to that second end, and even then he might feel there was more to be said. For this book is about the tragedy of racial miscegenation. It is, perhaps, the most sympathetic and understanding novel, in its intimate everyday way, about the clash of colour and race-prejudice and racial quality that has ever been written in English, and its very merits make its limitation of length and scope the more regrettable. It is not a book to read alone. One should go from it to *Le Chat Maigre* of M. Anatole France; and good collaterals to it would be Mr. Archer's *Through Afro-America* and Mr. Hesketh Prichard's *Where Black rules White*.

On the whole the strength of the book lies rather in the earlier part of it. Elisha Lee is the realest, most touching individuality in this little piebald group of second-rate humanity. He has, as the vulgar way of the studio puts it—*guts*. When he is hurt he swears, and the heart of the reader responds. David Lee is a weakling, diffusing a weakness over all the story of his development. The story loses spirit as he replaces his father. He is sensitive without strength, and expressive without pride. He *writes*. He wields what is ultimately the most powerful weapon a man can take into his hand, the pen. He has, we are told, the moving touch.

What more is needed for pride and happiness? Apparently the normal gratification of a healthy guinea-pig. All Mr. Merrick's skill will not reconcile us to the pathos of David's disappointment at the loss of a pretty fool, or make us see in him and Bee anything more than two unreasonably despondent beings who have merely to look up to rejoice in the gifts of understanding they possess. This second story is not a tragedy, but a misunderstanding, and when Mr. Merrick should begin to elucidate that, when, indeed, he has just got to the gist of his enthralling subject and brought his Quaint Companions together, he sounds a short unjustifiable note of sentimentality—and ends.

Since 1900 when Mr. Merrick closed this story eighteen years have passed. It is now possible to tell a little more of the fate of Bee and David. They did come into closer juxtaposition even as Mr. Merrick fore-shadowed. Indeed, availing themselves of the wilder courage of these latter days, they married. They had no children. Bee developed a practical side that was extraordinarily sustaining to David. She learnt to write and he, adventuring beyond the delicacies of his earlier days, began to produce short fantastic pieces of fiction that had an immense vogue in America....

But why confine ourselves to the limit of 1918? Let us glance on a few years. David's long-deferred success was now at hand. The younger generation hailed him with the utmost delight, his name became almost a symbol for the revolt against the lengthy, crowded novels of Bennett, Merrick, Wells, Cannan, Compton Mackenzie and their elderly contemporaries. David was inordinately praised by

the aged but still active Yeats, and elected an original member of the New Academy of Literature which had just received its charter. Mr. Gosse was extremely nice to him.... David's slight melancholy, his effect of ill-usage patiently borne has never quite deserted him, and the subtle charm of Bee's crumpled sweetness became more and more recognisable with the passing of the years....

Perhaps, like the sailor who wanted to fight the villain of the play, I have been a little carried away by the reality of the figures before me. How real these people are! So real are they that one can take them out of their author's hands and look at them in another light and not destroy them. That is a very good test of created reality. Elisha Lee is a memorable and unique figure. He stands for something that has never been done in fiction before, and he is done so well that he must necessarily become a type in our memories. He lives in my mind just as Micawber or Peter Quint live. And I would never be surprised to find myself in a railway carriage with Mrs. Lee and his stepson. How disagreeable they would make the journey! Bee I did actually see the other day, in the Hampstead tube; she did not look up, but I knew that it was Bee. And how admirable, too, is Professor Sorrenford and his comic opera!

But why go on? Yielding to a modern convention among publishers that good wine needs a bush, and being eager to set my admiration for and interest in Mr. Merrick on record, I have written this. But having subscribed my testimony, I very cheerfully gesture the reader on to the book.

H.G. WELLS.

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

Lee had not returned from the concert alone. Gregarious at all times, he never found solitude so little to his taste as when he left the platform—when he was still excited by the fervour of his voice and the public's applause. Two of the other soloists had driven to the hotel with him, and he had taken them up to his sitting-room to give them champagne, and proffer fat cigars. Though his guests resented his prosperity too bitterly to need reminding of it, he had changed his dress-coat for a smoking-jacket of plum-coloured velvet and was complacently conscious, as he crossed his slippered feet on the window-sill, that neither of his fellow-artists would fail to notice that he wore silk socks.

There was a pause in the vociferous conversation. Somewhere in the distance a clock struck a quarter to one. Like his companions, he had arrived here only in time for his engagement, but unlike them, he was remaining a fortnight for his pleasure. His gaze wandered from their sprawling forms to the view outside. The night was fair, and behind the silent Parade the decorous sea of Brighton shimmered becomingly under a full moon. Fifteen years had slipped by since he was in Brighton last, and in his mind they were momentarily effaced. By a perfectly natural process there rose in the stillness beyond the uncurtained window the apparition of his First Love.

Neither of the other men in the room saw it. Indeed she lingered there only an instant—just for a heart-beat—though some enchantment played upon the scene after she had

gone. Lee turned in his chair, and followed the girl into the past. In reality he was thirty-one; in fancy he was sixteen.

She had been beautiful. Even in retracing his youth by the light of experience, he would not wrong her by a lesser word. She was beautiful, and there was justification for his homage. But heavens! In retrospect he was humiliated to perceive his shyness; he beheld his blunders and his ignorance with dismay. How very young he had been at sixteen—how very young, to be sure!

The discovery caused him a distinct shock, for at the time he was convinced that he was exceedingly old for his age, and he had never been back till now to see if it was true. He recollected the evening when she first dazzled him; he had gone to the theatre here, and the overture was not more than half over when his sight was smitten by a girl sitting in the next row. She had the slightly disdainful air which becomes a girl to whom the gods have been bountiful, and whose dressmaker has done her duty. He watched her as man watches woman in the stage when he has yet to realise that she is mortal. She was with a lady whose features seemed familiar to him, and presently he remembered the lady's name. She was Mrs. Tremlett, and the girl could be no other than "Ownie"—"Ownie" who, when he stayed in their lodging-house a few summers since, had been in short frocks. Of a truth it was a very pretty incident, and the ordinary boy would have pronounced it "jolly luck"; but he—O lout! how stupid he had been, how self-conscious and impossible.

"You and Ownie must want to talk over old times?" A simple, kindly soul, the mother. He recalled her suggestion,

and the divinity's involuntary glance at her white kid glove as he released her hand. The sentiment of the evening, his tremors and his painful struggle to think of something to say recurred to him, though fifteen years had gone by since the audience dispersed. As they streamed out, Ownie Tremlett had turned with a smile to look at herself in a mirror in the vestibule. That was vivid, the girl's movement, and the reflection of her figure with the flimsy white thing over her hair—quick with the warmth of yesterday.

His absurdity of the following morning recurred to him too: he had lately acquired a trick with a loop of string, and had tramped the town tirelessly with a piece of string in his pocket, thrilling with the thought that it might draw their heads together. He recollected that at last he had met her, but that he didn't show her the trick after all—somehow the careless reference to it that he had rehearsed stuck to his tongue. He had said, "How d'ye do," and agreed that Brighton was very full. There was a humming in his ears that dulled her voice, and he had been obliged to keep clearing his throat. He was rather relieved to bid her good-bye. Reviewing the period, he could not remember that there had been any more, excepting that he had had the emotion of bowing to her on several occasions. Yes, that was all that had happened really. In the lyric that he made up about her, things had gone further—in that he had saved her life, and married her—but actually he had said very little, and forgotten her very soon.

Nevertheless she had been his First Love, and his thoughts strayed to her—or to his own boyhood—tenderly to-night. He wondered if she lived here still, and if it often

surprised her to reflect that the lad whom she had once known had risen to fame. She must be his own age, or rather more; the fact struck him queerly. The cruelties of life had bruised her now—Time had dimmed the radiance of the girl who had patted her golden hair in the mirror. For years she had not flitted across his memory, but being where he was, he saw her again. His interest revived, and gained ephemeral strength. He hoped she was not unhappy.

The pause came to an end. One of the visitors yawned, and said something about "making a move." Lee went downstairs with them, and they accepted a cigar each from his jewelled case to smoke on their way.

"Of course he can't help it," said the 'cellist to the baritone tentatively, as they got into stride, "but he does grate on a gentleman's nerves a bit, eh?"

The baritone took his arm, and foresaw a cheerful walk.

"What can you expect of a nigger?" he said with a shrug. "I always say it's a damned insult to us to put us in the same programme as a black chap. Have you got a match?—this cigar isn't burning straight."

In the card-room the gas was still alight, and Lee went in for a minute to open a local directory. He had forgotten the number, but her home had been in Regency Square. The name of "Mrs. Tremlett" appeared agreeably as the tenant of Sunnyview House. Ownie, no doubt, though, was married.

His youth sang clear to him when he went to bed, and it was not entirely mute next day. When he took a stroll after breakfast he smiled at his idea, but turned attentive eyes and hoped for what he felt to be unlikely. It was his humour to declare it possible that he might pass her, and he thought

that he would know her if they came face to face. So Elisha Lee, the negro tenor, sauntered along the Brighton front, looking for Ownie Tremlett where he had looked for her fifteen years before.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

The month was November, and the King's Road wore its smartest air. This was in the time before Brighton boasted so many places of amusement and while it was much more amusing. People promenaded on the roof of the Aquarium after dinner then; the pier at night twinkled with diamonds; and "La Fille de Madame Angot" was the popular selection by the band. Lee had stopped at a florist's and bought a rose for his buttonhole. In his elaborate toilette, twirling a tortoise-shell stick, and with his hat tilted a trifle to one side, he bore himself proudly. Nearly all of the last night's audience idled on the front. He marked with painful eagerness the quick glances, the occasional whispers he provoked—always avid of signs of recognition, always fearful of reading derision of his race. Sometimes at a look he caught, his teeth met behind his great lips, and fiercely he reminded himself of his empire while he sang. It was not so they looked at him then, these insolent women—with the curious stare that they might have levelled at a showman's freak. No, he could make their cold eyes misty, and their hearts throb faster, sway them, and thrill them—he, with his voice!

The man was to be pitied, though nobody pitied him and there were thousands who would have changed skins with him for the sake of his income. He was not without vulgarities; he was vain; he was prodigal; his failings were the failings of the average negro, intensified by the musical temperament and a dazzling success; but he had his higher hours, and in these he was doomed to be alone. He could buy gay company, but he could never gain affection; there were many who would laugh with him, but there was none to give him a sigh.

When he reached Regency Square he hesitated for an instant, and then moved slowly up it. He had no intention of calling at the house, but he wanted to look at the windows again. It was pleasurable to stroll round the square. It had not changed at all; it was just as he remembered it. He remembered the bushes at the top of the enclosure, and that they had been known to him as the "brigands' lair"; a military band used to play three times a week on the lawn when he was a child, and he wondered if it did so now. As he neared Mrs. Tremlett's, the door opened, and a woman came down the steps. She walked listlessly ahead of him. His full black eyes dilated, and he paused agape, presenting a rather comic appearance, as the negro so often does when he is in earnest. He thought that he had discerned a likeness to Ownie in her face; but it had flashed on him only for a second—in the circumstances he was very liable to deceive himself.

He saw that she was in mourning—more, that the veil depending from her bonnet proclaimed her a widow. He followed. She turned the corner; and, quickening his pace,

he arrived in Preston Street just in time to see her enter a fishmonger's. Her position during the few minutes that she remained there was unfavourable; but when she came out, the view that he caught of her could scarcely have been better, and now he was tempted to address her on the chance of being right.

She passed him before he had thought what to say, and he loitered behind her discreetly, until she went into a greengrocer's. A display of fruit offered an alternative to his waiting on the pavement this time; he would order some grapes to be sent to his hotel! He would order some grapes and utter his name loudly, so that she heard it; if he had really found Ownie, she might bow.

Her business was concluded, however, and she left the shop before anyone attempted to serve him. Some minutes were wasted before he was free to pursue her. He took hasty strides, afraid that she was lost. Her veil came in sight again at the end of the street, and, dodging among the crowd on the King's Road, he kept at close quarters to her for a long while, wishing that she would cross to the other side and sit down.

At the foot of Ship Street she crossed to the other side at last, but she did not stop until she reached Marine Parade. On Marine Parade there were fewer visitors. A nursemaid narrated her wrongs, while her charges imperilled their necks on the railings; here and there a bow-backed man who owned a bath-chair enjoyed a respite and a pipe; a sprinkling of convalescent Londoners, basking in the summer weather, forgot their shivers in the City of Gloom. The lady settled herself on a bench. Lee lounged nearer. She

was paler and more languid than he recalled her; he could see shadows about Beauty's eyes which the mirror had not shown to him at the theatre, but he felt sure it was she. Though he had believed himself prepared to find her changed, he found the difference saddening—just as if he were a white man, and a girl of whom he used to be fond had been met after many years.

As he drew level with her, she noticed him with a quick frown. Evidently she had misconstrued his interest. He stopped, and, throwing away his cigar with a nourish, said:

"Miss Tremlett?"

The lady in widow's weeds looked surprised and indignant, and he added hurriedly:

"That's the name I knew you by. Don't you remember me? I'm Elisha Lee."

Her expression was astonished still, but the indignation had faded when he heard her, voice.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh, are you? I didn't know you again. Fancy! Yes, I remember. It's a long time ago."

"Let me see," he said; "it must be fifteen years. I recognised you at once."

She regarded him more kindly, and gave him a faint smile; "I shouldn't have thought you would."

"How's that? I'm not short-sighted. Do you know, I was thinking about you yesterday; hoped I should meet you—and here you are. I haven't been in Brighton since the last time I saw you."

"Haven't you really?"

"No; it's funny, isn't it? I've often been coming—for the week-end, or a concert, but something has always turned up

to prevent me. Well, this is first-rate! Were you at the Dome last night?"

"No," she said, "I couldn't go; I was sorry. I heard you in Liverpool once. Let me congratulate you—though I suppose you get such a lot of congratulations that you don't care much about them any more?"

"You can bet I care for yours," he said. "Have you been living here all the time?"

"Oh no; I left here when I married; I only came back after my loss." Her tone was bitter.

"I saw," said Lee, "I saw by your dress that——Is it long since you were left a widow?"

"Twelve months. My home was in Liverpool while my poor husband was alive. Why, you used to know him, Mr. Lee! Yes, of course you did. That summer as children we were all together. How strange! I'm not sure if you met him afterwards? I wonder if you can remember 'Reggy Harris'?"

The long-forgotten name awoke memories of a pasty-faced boy peppered with freckles, who had always called him "Snowball." He bowed solemnly. For a moment it deprived the situation of all its sentiment to hear that she had married Reggy Harris.

"Things happen queerly, don't they?" she said with a short laugh. "I married, and I left Brighton for good—and I sit telling you about it when I am in Regency Square all over again. I never thought I should come back any more, excepting on a visit. Of course I used to come to see mother."

"I hope your mother is well?" he said.

"Yes," she answered, "thank you.... It was mother who was certain from the first that the singer we read about must be you. I had forgotten you were called 'Elisha,' but she was sure you were; and the 'Elisha' settled it. We did stare!"

"I thought you would. But I'm not the only 'Elisha' where I come from, by a long chalk. Biblical names are very common among us; we like them. In Savannah, where I was born, I daresay you'd find a good many 'Elishas'—and as to 'Lees,' they're as plentiful as pins. You stared, eh? It seemed wonderful?"

"Well, yes, it did. But your parents were—were musical, too, weren't they?"

"My parents came over here as ban joists when I was a kiddy. They played jolly well."

"Are they living?"

He shook his head. "I am quite alone in the world," he said theatrically. "They were spared to see me famous, though; I'm glad of that."

"They must have been ever so proud of you."

"They were ever so good to me," he replied, and his manner was natural again. "They got decent terms in the music-halls, and they sent me to school, and did all they could for me. It was on one of their tours, you know, that I stayed in your house. They paid some people to give me a good time during my holidays, God bless 'em."

There was a brief pause. A little child, trailing her toy spade, lagged to a standstill and watched him expectantly. He drove her away with an angry gesture; the lady blushed.

"I think I must be going," she murmured, rising. "I've got to meet my baby and the nurse. If you sing down here again, Mr. Lee, I hope I shall hear you."

"I'll sing to you whenever you like," he said promptly. "Won't you and Mrs. Tremlett come and have dinner with me at the hotel one evening? I've got a piano in my sitting-room."

"My mother so seldom goes out at night."

"Let me ask her and do a bit of coaxing!"

"Oh—er—if you can, of course," she said, "though I'm afraid it would be no good. We shall be glad to see you."

He swept off his hat, and took leave of her buoyantly. While they talked he had ceased to contrast her with what she used to be and thought only of the young and pretty woman who was present. Having less refinement than when she was a girl, too, she made him a more intimate appeal. The vulgarities in her blood had come to the surface by this time. At seventeen, to be a gentlewoman superficially is not impossible, but at thirty-two the varnish cracks.

He saw her again, himself unnoticed, as he was returning to lunch. A little nurse-girl-a cheap imitation to be called a "nurse," he thought—pushed a perambulator, and the widow walked drearily beside it. Threading her way among the fashionable toilettes, she looked poor and discontented to him; she looked sullen, like a woman who resents her fate. But she had blue eyes and yellow hair, and he had never resisted a desire in his life. He promised himself to call on her the next day.

CHAPTER III

Table of Contents

He went early in the afternoon, and he found her more cordial than on Marine Parade, though he gathered that she had been unprepared to see him so soon. He was shown into a small back parlour reserved for the family's own use, and when he entered she was in a rocking-chair with her baby on her lap. At his playful advances it began to cry, and it wailed continuously while he paid it the usual compliments, and heard that it was fifteen months old, and christened "Vivian."

"The only one?" he asked, as the noise subsided.

"Yes," she said, "I lost my little girl. How nice of you to remember your promise! I made sure you'd forget."

"That was very wicked of you. You ought to have known better; didn't I show you what sort of a memory I've got?"

"Well, really you did! I can't think how you knew me again."

"Why, you haven't changed much," he said, "you were just as good-looking then."

"Don't be so foolish." She bent over the baby.

"I knew you directly I caught sight of you. You were just coming out of the house."

"What, this house? Were you passing?"

He nodded, grinning. "And I followed you into Preston Street."

"I saw you in Preston Street," she said. "You came into the greengrocer's, didn't you?"

"Yes, but first I'd had to wait outside a fishmonger's. Oh, I had a heap of trouble before I got a chance to speak to you,

I can tell you! You looked so——Lee was 'fraid!"

"Did I?" She gave him instinctively the glance she would have given to a white man. "Oh, I had no idea who you were, you know. I thought——"

"Thought my admiration infernal cheek, eh? Didn't you look me up and down when I came to the seat! 'Sir, how dare you?' you meant. *I* knew!" His jolly laughter shook him, and startled the baby into a fresh outbreak.

"Well, I was all right when I understood, now wasn't I?—There, there, pet, suck his ribbons, and let his mummy talk!—Do you know, I've got something to ask you, Mr. Lee; after you had gone it struck me you might be able to give me a hint. I want to make use of my voice; I thought perhaps you would tell me the best way to set about it? I have written to people already, but they don't answer, and——His mummy will have to send him away if he isn't quiet."

"Make use of your voice?" he said doubtfully. "Oh yes, I'll help you with pleasure if there's anything I can do, but what is it you mean?"

"I was thinking of concert singing; only in a small way, of course—I know I can't expect to do anything marvellous—but I've had a lot of lessons, and in Liverpool I used to practise hard. My master——If you'll excuse me for a minute, I'll take Baby upstairs."

He excused her for that purpose readily, and when she came back her mother was with her. He found that Mrs. Tremlett had altered too, but in the most surprising way. When he was a lad she had looked quite old to him, and now she looked only middle-aged. She was the widow of a novelist who had written such beautiful prose that many

people had been eager to meet him—once. Afterwards they talked less about his prose than his manners. He had left her, their daughter, a policy for five hundred pounds, and an album of carefully pasted Press cuttings. During his life she had suffered with him in furnished apartments; at his death she took to letting them. She was a well-meaning, weak-natured creature. For forty years she had related her dream of the previous night over the breakfast-table, and read the morning paper after supper. She religiously preserved the reviews, which she had never understood; believed that Darwin was a monomaniac who said we sprang from monkeys; and that Mrs. Hemans had written the most beautiful poetry in the world.

"Mother was quite excited when she heard I had seen you," said Mrs. Harris. "Weren't you, mother?"

"You were a very bad girl. What do you think, Mr. Lee? She came home and said that a—that a"—she gulped—"a strange man had stopped and spoken to her. Such a thing to say! And she didn't tell me who it was for ever so long."

He understood that he had been referred to as a "nigger." She deprecated her blunder to the younger woman with worried eyes, and the latter struck in hastily:

"I was just telling Mr. Lee what I want to do, mother. He thinks he might help me."

"Oh, now I'm sure that's very kind of him indeed! You see, Mr. Lee, it's not altogether nice for Ownie here, and of course having had a home of her own, she feels it more still. Well, dear, you do, it's no good denying it! If she had something to take her out of herself a little it would be so good for her in every way; and we always thought she

would make money with her voice—it's a magnificent one, really."

Mrs. Harris shrugged her shoulders. "To talk about its being 'magnificent' in front of Mr. Lee is rather funny. But if I could make even a second-rate position," she went on, "I should be satisfied. I'd try for an engagement in a comic opera if I thought I could act, but I'm afraid I should be no good on the stage, and one has to start in such tiny parts. We had a lady staying with us who used to be in the profession, and she was telling us how hard the beginning was."

"And do you imagine that concert-engagements are to be had for the asking?" he said. "Good heavens! But of course you don't know anything about the musical world—how should you?"

"I don't imagine that they are to be had for the asking," she returned a shade tartly; "but if one can sing well enough, the platform must be easier for a woman like me than the stage, by all accounts."

"Accounts," he echoed, "whose accounts? I could give you accounts that would make your hair stand up. Do you know that professional singers, with very fine voices, come over from the Colonies to try to get an appearance here and find they can't do it? They eat up all the money that they've saved and go back beggared. They go back beaten and beggared. It is happening all the time. My dear girl, you couldn't make a living on the concert-stage under five years if you had the voice of an Angel."

"Not if I had bad luck, I daresay," she muttered.

"I tell you nobody can do it—it isn't to be done. It would take you five years to earn a bare living if you were a Miracle. The Americans and Australians try it for two or three and clear out with broken hearts and empty pockets. It's killing; they starve while they are struggling to be heard. I'll give you an example; a singer with a glorious voice came to England—*I* say it, 'glorious.' I won't mention his name, it wouldn't be fair; but, mind, this is a fact! He had worked hard in his own country—they believed in him there; they got up a benefit for him before he sailed. He had three thousand pounds when he landed—and he spent every penny trying to get a footing here and went home in despair.... Do you know that when I give a concert, even artists who *are* making a living go to my agent, and offer him twenty, twenty-five, thirty guineas to be allowed to sing at it?"

"They pay to be allowed to sing?" said Mrs. Tremlett. "But why should they do that?"

"Because they can't get into a fashionable programme without; and it's worth paying for. Singers who have been at the game half their lives do it, I tell you. I'm not supposed to know. *I* don't get their money; I leave the agent to engage the people to support me, and if he makes a bit extra over the affair—well, he forgets to talk to me about it! But it's a usual thing. 'Easy for a woman'?" He turned to Mrs. Harris again, and rolled his black head. "Easy? Poor soul! She looks so fine, doesn't she, when she sweeps down the platform in her satin dress and lays her bouquet on the piano? Oh, dear Lord! if you knew what she has gone through to get there. And what it has cost her to get there. And how she has